

Year C Advent 3 2021

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Zephaniah 3.14-end; Isaiah 12.2-end; Luke 3.7-18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

John the Baptist is not the sort of person to win friends to influence people. Today we live in a culture in which confrontation and offence can undermine the importance of the message. But John will not be cancelled. He will not dilute the truth to avoid causing offence. Standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, and pointing to the new realisation of God's will, he tells things as they are. "You brood of vipers!" It's confrontational, it's challenging, and it is an insult. It is certainly one way to get the attention of those who you are addressing. What is most striking is that John is a truth teller. He is telling things as they are, and not how people want them to be, two very different things.

Why are the crowds who come to him a 'brood of vipers?' It is because they are caught up in their own preoccupation, and do not focus on the purposes of God. That's why John tells them to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." But here's the rub. The question John posed to the crowd then, he poses to us today. Are we living a life focused on Jesus Christ? Do we "produce fruit in keeping with repentance?" Do we abound in "love, joy and peace". Are our motivations for our faith in keeping with the message that we have received and made our own and not a Pascal-esq wager?

John's blunt questions and truth telling demand truthful answers that lead to repentance, our turning back to God. We must always do so in humility. After all, John denounces those who are too proud of their righteousness, too certain of the strength of their relationship with God. The worst sort to my mind are those who think they have inherited a good relationship with God yet don't work on that relationship (and all of us are guilty of this at time – I know I am).

As it happens, I am the third of my immediate family to stand in a pulpit and preach. I have two ordained uncles, one of my cousins is a bishop, and I have a grandfather and great-grandfather who served as priests for many years. I am very much born into the household of faith. By inheritance I should be fine, but today's Gospel tells us that this does not matter in the slightest. "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' In other words, 'I have inherited a good relationship with God', the question is, 'Do I live it?'

Regardless of how much Christianity may run in the family, faith must be our own. One might think that in my situation, being surrounded by Anglicans, and a very specific strand of the Anglican Tradition, would lead to blind acceptance of faith and tradition, and it would be wrong to suggest that our families don't have a significant impact on our practice.

But there are members of my wider family who do not attend church, despite having the same background. And, if anything, my upbringing leads to greater questioning and scrutiny. It increases dialogue and discussion, and it furthers the search for the whole truth. When I want to discuss a matter of faith with my parents, I do not ask what I should think or believe, but why. By virtue of my presence here at Christ Church, I have broadened my horizons into a different dimension of the Anglican Tradition.

John asks us about our motivation for our faith, and this questioning, and the subsequent emphasis on genealogy is reflected in St Paul's letter to the Philippians, when he writes imploring those who confess Christ to "put no confidence in the flesh".

Paul tells us that he has more reason than any to have confidence in the flesh "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." In other words,

Paul can say, 'I inherited a good relationship with God'. But he goes on to tell us that his pedigree is not enough for salvation. In this he echoes John the Baptist. Both are telling us to be introspective, to examine ourselves, so that we may ultimately lose this focus upon ourselves and learn to focus upon God.

In Philippians, Paul goes on to tell us that salvation isn't a case of arithmetic. He says that "whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." One cannot count up pious acts and subtract sins and come up with a result that determines whether one gets into heaven or not. It is about something much greater than that. The prayer over the bread and wine, the Prayer of Thanksgiving, in the Book of Common Prayer acknowledges this saying that "we are unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice; yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences, through Jesus Christ our Lord." This is absolutely the key point that Paul and John both want to relay. We are unworthy of what we have received, and especially so if we think that we have earned it. We are to acknowledge God as the giver of all that is good, and we are to thank him for his abundant goodness. And although we are unworthy this does not matter to God, because he has great love for us. And God's love for us inspires us in turn to have love for him. This is the correct motivation for coming to church and increasing in faith. To want to know Christ, first and foremost. And if we come to know Christ, things can begin to fall into place. With us, as it was for Paul, the scales will fall from our eyes.

Okay then John, okay then Paul, what is our response? What do we do? Helpfully, that's what the crowd asked! John tells them to be generous and to share. He tells them to be honest and trustworthy. He preaches contentment and satisfaction. These are the fruits of the Spirit, "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." All these things are what it means to know Christ. Following Christ is about walking with Christ, not just talking about Him!

A good starting point in this season of Advent and beyond is recommitting ourselves to prayer through adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. I feel we confess enough, and we certainly make ample supplication. But can we say we adore and give thanks enough? Do we hold joy for Christ in our hearts, and joy in our lives? an important question this Gaudete Sunday. Can we make hope in Christ our own, not just what was once told to us?

Both our Old Testament reading, and the canticle we heard today emphasise this. “Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment” and “Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

Yes, John doesn't pull his punches; we do need to wake up to God that we may not waste away in sadness. Be joyful. Advent is a time of expectation and hope, and it climaxes in the greatest, the most extraordinary, and the most incomprehensible moment of all time. The Incarnation of the Lord. The word made flesh. Remember why you became a Christian and sing about it. Remember why you are a Christian and sing about it. Proclaim it to the nations in deed, word and song.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.